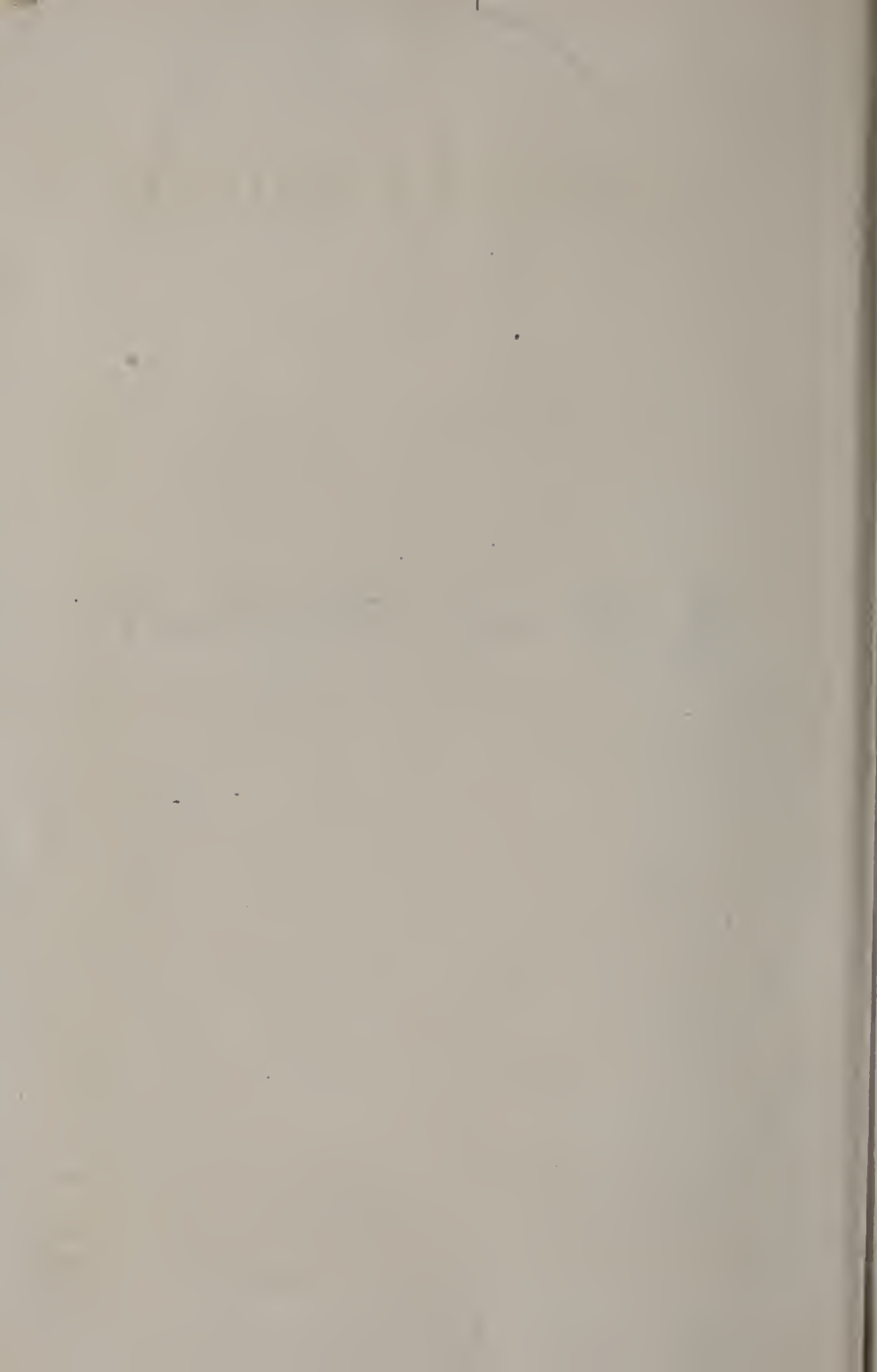


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A Hindoo Festival.

BY REV. A. RUDOLPH.



A HINDOO FESTIVAL.

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NOWHERE, perhaps, does heathenism manifest itself more in its naked folly, and nowhere does it appear more hideous, than on a heathen festival, where the superstition and bigotry of an unthinking, fanatical multitude is running wild. Nowhere, perhaps, does the missionary feel more the difficulty of his calling, and, at the same time, his utter helplessness, then when he visits one of those festivals called in India "Melas." To give at least a remote idea of what heathenism in that country means, I will try to lead you in spirit to one of these festivals, many of which I have visited during my stay of 38 years in India.

GANGES.

You know that the Ganges is to the Hindoo a holy object, to which he offers divine worship, and in whose waters he bathes in the hope that there all his sins shall be washed away. This magnificent stream, therefore, is an object of adoration throughout its whole length for upwards of 1,500 miles, from its sources in the Himalayas down to its mouth in the Bay of Bengal. Gangotrè, the fountains; Hardwar, where the river leaves the mountains and flows into the broad plains of India; Allahabad, where it is joined by an auxiliary, the Jumna; Hajeepore, where the Gandhak flows into it; Benares, hard on the banks of the stream, and to the Hindoo the very gate of heaven, and many similar localities, are noted places of pilgrimage, where, at stated seasons of the year, thousands of people from all parts of the land congregate for the purpose of viewing the river, as they express it, of sipping its waters, and bathing in its floods. Weeks, sometimes months, before the appointed time, Brahmins and fakirs travel through the land from town to town, and from village to village, and invite the people to follow them to the holy shrine, and thus to gather merit and to obtain *mukti* (salvation). Parties of from 20 to 50 or more are met day by day on the highways, on foot and in ox-carts, on ponies and elephants, all eagerly pressing forward toward the supposed fountains of bliss. The nights, whether dry or wet, are spent in the open air by the side of the road, often far from any human habitation. An open plain and a well by the roadside is all the accommodation they claim, though groves and still more sheltered places in villages and towns are made use of if they come in their

way. With the earliest dawn these companies break up to leave the encamping-ground of the past night, for another long, tedious journey must be accomplished before evening sets in. Thus are weeks, sometimes months, spent in traveling; for the longer the journey and the greater the fatigue, the greater is the merit gained. At last, after many a weary march, and many a night spent in discomfort on the bare ground, they reach the end of their journey, hungry and thirsty, foot-sore and fatigued, covered thickly with dust. But mother Ganges has to offer them no comfortable accommodation in hotels or inns, no soft beds, no well-cooked meals. Nothing but a vast sandy plain by the banks of the river, that has been overflowed during the rainy season, and that has since been dried again by the rays of an Indian sun, is all, besides muddy water, that this goddess has to offer to her votaries. No shrub, hardly a blade of grass, is to be seen; a few stunted trees may be scattered over the vast plain, but these have been secured in time by Brahmins, who invariably occupy the nicest spots that can be found in India.

As soon as a party of pilgrims arrives and views the longed-for object—the Ganges—one of them calls out to his companions, “bolo” (shout), and all with one accord shout at the top of the voice, “Gangá jí kí jai” (victory to the Ganges). This, in fact, had been the watchword all along since they started on the journey, but now it is uttered with greater energy than it had ever been done before. A coarse cloth is spread on the ground; those who can afford it set up a few bamboo sticks, spread a blanket or piece of cotton cloth over it, and this forms the habitation for the people by day, and the only shelter for the night while the *mela* lasts. New parties now arrive in quick succession, and in a very short time are the sandy banks of the river covered for miles by an immense multitude of people. Thus these silent wastes become suddenly, as by the wand of a magician, the scene of life and activity. At the common yearly festivals the pilgrims are counted by thousands, but on the return of the *kumb* (*mela*, that occurs every twelfth year) they are numbered by hundreds of thousands, and have sometimes reached that of a million. On arrival, the thickest dust is shaken out of the clothes and wiped off the face. A short rest is taken, and then the men, leaving the women squatting together in parties, chatting and laughing, screaming and quarreling, walk about to look up acquaintances, to see sights, and to amuse themselves as best they can, for, though the object of the *mela* is the adoration of the Ganges, this, as well as all other heathen worship, is quite consistent with the most childish frivolities, and even sinful amusements and excesses.

FAKIRS AND THEIR SELF-TORTURE.

There is a crowd of people running to meet a company of naked fakirs, marching along in procession. They are viewed with special interest, and admired as the holy men of India. Their bodies are covered from head to foot with ashes, or if a high degree of holiness is attained, with dung. For years their long entangled hair has not been combed. It is clotted together with

dirt, and has of course become the harbor of vileness that a civilized man abominates. The one carries around his shoulders a tiger's skin ; another has stuck a bunch of peacock's feathers in his hair ; another has wrapped himself in a quilt composed of rags of the most incongruous stiffs and colors ; another carries in his hand a pair of immense fire-tongs, for he is a fire-worshiper ; another wears a huge devil's cap on his head, and indeed if you wished to make an image of the evil one, you could hardly choose a more befitting pattern. If the external appearance of these fakirs is hideous in the extreme, their proud, wanton look betrays a mind as filthy and hideous as their bodies. But why should they not be proud ? If the Ganges is adored as a goddess, they are worshiped as gods ; for they have the power to curse as well as to bless. You are provoked to believe them devils incarnate, and you wish them anywhere rather than here, where they expose their vile bodies to the gaze of women as well as men. If public opinion now, and the known disapprobation of Government to entire nudity, did not force them to wear a rag of cloth six inches long and four inches broad, they would gladly dispense with even that much of covering, as they used to do only a few years ago.

There is another crowd gathering around a pilgrim that is just coming in. He had made the vow to go on a pilgrimage to the Ganges, but not in the ordinary way ; but to measure the way from his distant habitation to the banks of the Ganges by the length of his body. Look, he has just risen from the ground ; carefully he steps up to the mark he had drawn with his finger on the sand ; now he prostrates himself on the ground with the face in the dust, draws another line in the sand along by his head ; rises again, places his feet near the stroke on the ground, again lays himself down to make another mark. Several months ago he commenced this queer mode of traveling, and now he has finished the journey, and is just in time to take part in the *mela*, and receive the homage of the people, for henceforth he is a saint, and entitled to the good things of the earth that will now be offered unto him freely.

Let us go and see what that booth contains. It seems to be a great center of attraction, for it is surrounded continually by crowds of sight-seers. A dozen fakirs sit here in state ; they are self-tormentors that have held up one of their arms vertically, until it has dried up to a stick. The joints at the shoulder and elbow have lost their use, so that the arm can not now be brought down again to its natural position. The nails have never been trimmed since, and have outgrown the length of the fingers, and in some instances have grown into the flesh in the palm of the hand.

You pity that poor cripple who stands on one leg, leaning with folded arms upon a low crotchet ; the other leg hangs down lifeless and dried up by the side of its partner. But this is not the way the man came forth from the hand of the Creator ; nor was it an accident that deprived him of the use of the limb. Ten years ago he vowed to stand for sixteen years on one leg ; six still remain till he shall have paid his vow in full. In the summer, when a fierce Indian sun is trying the constitution even of a native of that sunny land, he causes five

fires to be kindled around him, and in winter, when the nights are sometimes sharp and cold in Northern India, he causes the people to carry him into a shallow tank, where he spends the night, standing in the water, leaning upon his crotch. His only food is cow's milk now, and this is freely brought to him by the people, who say that he has now almost become Parmeshwar (God).*

The question may be asked, What induced these men to choose a life like this? Was it a deep sorrow that drove them to it? Was it the smiting of conscience that gave them no rest and made them thus try to atone for past sins? Did they feel it to be their duty to crucify the flesh, and did they therefore choose this method of mortifying it? Is it peace of heart that they thus seek to obtain? Their looks do not betray it; we can read nothing but utter stupidity or inveterate pride on their countenances, a vain gratification on being gazed at and admired. We stand before a problem which we can not solve. A whim, a fit of passion, a quarrel in the family, a supposed wrong inflicted is often sufficient to make a native of India throw away his life and commit suicide; but more is needed to give to these self-tormentors that persevering determination which deadens them to bodily pain, and enables them to bear discomfort of the most revolting kind. Even the strongest desire to become great, and to be adored as a god, does not fully explain the mystery. But we do discover in many of these strange phenomena a disgusting caricature of Bible truths, and may not be far wrong if we suspect demon-like influence that empowers a man to destroy limbs of his body by a tedious, painful process of self-torture, and to lead a life studiously uncomfortable and abhorrent to human nature.

A few paces up the hill bring us into the presence of another abominable sight. A stark-naked fakir lies with spread-out arms and legs, and with closed eyes, upon a bare, sloping rock, without the least motion of a limb, from early dawn till late at night, and, if we are to believe the people, all night through. Women as well as men prostrate themselves before him and offer their copper coins. He makes a good business of it, and yet he pretends to be dead to the world and to the things thereof. I step up to him, call him a great sinner, a deceiver, lazy-bones, that ought to use the sound limbs which his Maker has given him to earn an honest livelihood. I hope to rouse his anger at least, if I do nothing better, to prove to the people that he is not quite as unimpressible as he pretends to be; but there is no sign of life. His features betray no displeasure. I might as well scold the rock on which he lies. The by-standers now speak for him, and tell me that he has been lying there till the rock is worn away. But I point out to them the marks of the chisel with which the rock has been hollowed out to admit the body so as to keep it from sliding down the hill. They smile and admit the fact, but for all that they

* This man was found dead one morning in his hut, after he had accomplished thirteen years in this unnatural position. A temple has been erected in the place where his hut stood, near the tank in Phagwara, twenty miles north of Ludiana, and has become a place of pilgrimage on a small scale.

continue to worship him and to bring their offerings. They care nothing for truth, and therefore strong delusions are sent them to believe a lie. We turn away and find another fakir hung up by the feet from the branch of a low tree, head downward, swinging slowly over a smoking fire of cow-dung. And again another is squatting down on the ground, who has accustomed himself to swallow his breath. A gurgling noise in the throat, and a violent, spasmodic movement of the neck and upper part of the body, is enough to send you away from so disgusting a sight, but only to cast your eyes up to a fat, naked fakir riding on a huge elephant caparisoned with beautifully gold-embroidered, scarlet coverings, while another from behind is fanning him with a large palm-leaf. Voluntary poverty and untold wealth thus go hand in hand with this class of saints. But heathenism is made up of inconsistencies, and you cease to wonder at anything after this.

BRAHMINS AND THEIR TRICKS.

If the eye refuses to look any longer at loathsome sights as exhibited here, the ear is no less tried with the filthy, noisy, unbecoming conversation that is going on. Abusive language grates upon the ear everywhere. A number of Brahmins, with large books under their arms, are lining the road and are watching for new pilgrims coming in. Two of these gentlemen have descried a well-to-do party traveling in ox-carts, and are trying to outrun each other so as to meet it first. Each one insists that the forefathers of this family are registered in his book, and each one insists on receiving now a fresh registering fee. They are not sparing in their abuses, each one calling the other a liar and a deceiver, and no doubt both are right. There is, however, no way of escape; both must be paid off with a gift, and the party is glad enough to get off so cheaply; but they will soon fall into the hands of others like them.

Two other Brahmins have commenced using their fists as well as their tongues, and threaten to kill one another. A poor pilgrim, such as the Brahmins call in contempt a two-penny pilgrim, who had already been robbed of his scanty supply of cash, handed them a piece of cloth half a yard long. They know it is all he can give, so they fall upon the prey and fight for it, while he hastens on, glad enough to have escaped their hands. The crowd looks on with manifest delight, for this also belongs to the lawful amusements at the mela. I ask them, Are you not ashamed of the conduct of your Brahmins? They smile, and pass on thoughtlessly to see something else. Let us follow them and see what they are after.

A WONDERFUL MEDLEY.

There are long rows of booths erected, in which merchandise of every kind is offered for sale; for though the primary object of the mela is a religious one, the opportunity for speculators is too good to be lost. A large bazar, therefore, offers all that a native thinks worth bringing. There are articles of clothing, shawls, jewelry, trinkets, shoes, pipes, tobacco, idols, books, pictures, food, confectionery, all thickly covered with dust; for dust is an article you get

here in abundance, whether you will have it or not. A dozen carousals, overburdened with men, women, and children, are swung round vigorously, and for want of oil, make an unbearable squeaking noise. Rope-dancers, snake-charmers, jugglers, bear-wards, monkey-leaders, all draw large circles of spectators, that seem to be quite unconscious of the inconvenience they create in obstructing the passages, while men, women, children, fantastically dressed-up fakirs, fat Brahmins, dancing-girls, policemen, soldiers, ox-carts, elephants, camels, horses, donkeys, half starved dogs, pass back and forward in wild confusion. What pen could draw a complete picture of all that passes before the eye, and of the bustle of the hundreds of thousands, shouting, laughing, vociferating, quarreling, to be outdone only by that ear-splitting, most disharmonious, monotonous music that heads procession after procession? One must have seen such scenes to form an idea of what a mela in India is.

Come, let us leave this unruly mass; the noise has become insufferable, and the dust is suffocating. A fearfully hot Indian sun is pouring down a continuous stream of fire, not to be moderated, even for a moment, by a passing cloud or the shade of a tree. That umbrella, with which we try to protect our head, is twisted into all sorts of shapes. Scarcely have we got disentangled from one throng, when we are involved again in another. Is there no quiet place here where we may again collect our thoughts, and once more be master of our senses? Yes, there at the edge of the vast encamping-ground; come, let us seek rest there.

THE MISSIONARY AND THE FIVE ELEMENTS OF RELIGION.

But who is coming in there, a European, and there is another? You know them at once by their foreign dress and their fair complexion. They are men of grave countenance; from a distance they look at the spectacle, but it seems to make them sad. They, too, look-up a spot suitable to pitch their camp, but not in the midst of the din and noise, for they need quiet, not, perhaps, so much for themselves, though they look very tired, but for the business they are going to do here at the mela. Their ox-cart has arrived, a tent is taken down and pitched; boxes, one, two, three, are carried into the tent. They contain articles of clothing, food, cooking vessels, dishes for the use of these foreigners, also a folding-table, two camp chairs, and a something with four legs, by courtesy called bedstead. Two heavy cases are still on the cart; with the aid of some helping hands from the crowd, they are taken down and carried to the door of the tent. "No," shouts the foreigner, "not into the tent; we will put them down here outside the tent. They are not for our use, they are for the people." What goods may they contain, and will the people buy anything from these strangers?

Why not? On their sign-board you read, "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money, come ye, buy and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk, without money and without price. Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labor for that which satis-

fieth not? Hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness." Those two heavy cases contain the bread of life, Scriptures and tracts; those two foreigners are missionaries, who have come to this mela with a commission from their Master: "Go ye, and teach all nations. Teach them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." They have brought to the poor, misled Hindoos the everlasting Gospel, which the Lord has given, to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people. It is the trumpet of the Gospel that is sounded now; but will it be heard in this tumult?

The missionary, his dress, his tent, and all its belongings, have all along been scrutinized by the crowd, and are made the subject of remark without any reserve. To draw their attention away from these things and to direct it to the main object of his visit, the missionary pulls from his pocket a large, colored sheet, and unfolding it, he reads out, in their own language, "the five elements of religion." The figure *five* is an important one to the Hindoo. He believes the universe to be constructed of five elements, earth, water, fire, air, and the heavens. The Panch'ayat, a council of *five*, is usually called together to settle matters between contending parties or to pronounce on some important point.

The missionary now proclaims "the *five* elements of the true religion." 1, Khnda maiik hai (God is Lord). 2, Insan gunahgar hai (man is a sinner). 3, Dozakh ki saza hogi (punishment of hell awaits him). 4, Yisu bachane-wala hai (Jesus is the Saviour). 5, Shart iman hai (Faith is the condition). He explains more fully the meaning of these five points; he shows up the folly of idolatry, the wickedness of sinning against a holy and righteous God, the danger of encountering the wrath of a living God. He speaks of the helping hand that is stretched out toward the sinner in sending Jesus Christ to save him from sin, and insists on the importance of repentance and faith in that Saviour. As soon as the one is tired, the other missionary takes up the subject, and then follow the native assistants with their discourses. Preaching thus is kept up till evening. The boxes of books and tracts have been opened in the meantime, and the contents are offered for sale at a nominal price. Thus many a pilgrim carries in his hand, to a distant home, that may never have been reached yet by a messenger of the truth, the testimony on the printed page, and in his heart conviction of sin, and in his mind a doubt of the all-sufficiency of the Ganges. The missionaries and their catechists thus work day after day, while the mela lasts, from morning till night, each one taking his turn in blowing the trumpet of the Gospel and watching for the downfall of the walls of Jericho; but that stronghold will not fall till it be compassed seven times, and till there is made a long blast with the Gospel trumpet. That trumpet gives no uncertain sound, but to the heathen ear there is not much music in it. The keynote is always faith toward God, confession of sin, repentance from dead works, and implicit trust in a crucified Saviour.

A MOTLEY CROWD.

There is no lack of hearers ; but the audiences change in the course of the day a hundred times. You watch the different countenances ; some evidently listen with much interest, some appear quite indifferent ; some seem to be deeply in earnest, others walk away with a smile of contempt ; some nod approval, others in going off call it a lie and the preacher a cheat. Brahmins now take up their weapons of defense ; they begin to fear that thus the walls of Jericho may become undermined after all ; their craft is in danger. The attacks of the missionary are directed as much against them as against their religious system. They force him into a discussion, and though they are beaten off on one point, they have a hundred others in reserve. They know little of the rules of propriety, and their remarks are seasoned with bitter invective, calculated to vex the Christian preacher, and to take him off his guard and provoke him to angry retorts. A Mohammedan, though in principle agreeing with all that the missionary says against idol-worship, is yet filled with envy at seeing the crowd listening to the preaching of salvation through Christ. He plays the dog in the manger, and tries to raise a disturbance by cutting remarks. He does not care to know the truth himself, nor does he wish others to know it.

Thus the missionaries have worked with their helpers for ten days in succession. At last they are thoroughly tired out ; their strength is almost spent ; they have become very hoarse, and now their voice can only be heard by those that stand nearest them. But the great day of the feast has also come, and it is the last day. The multitude is now swelled to an incredible size. All now press eagerly forward to the banks of the river for the last time. Once more every one bathes in the muddy water, the men almost entirely naked, the women with a sheet around them. The face is turned toward the sun ; both hands being filled with water are raised above their heads and the water is allowed to flow slowly down into the river. The body is rubbed down ; once more it is dipped down in the water, a dry cloth is thrown around the shoulders, the wet one that has dropped underneath is washed and wrung out, and away they go, chatting and laughing as they came. At the large festivals the throng in the water is so great that the older and weaker people have a hard time in getting back to dry ground. They are pushed further and further into the stream, and there have been instances where such have been carried away by the current. What does it signify ? Is not this the gate of heaven ? He that dies here obtains *mukti*—*mukti*, that undefined good, exemption from a painful existence in some low animal after death ; absorption in the deity without self-consciousness, as the drop returns to the ocean. The Brahmins are still busy, eager to gather gifts, to give counsel, and to strip the poor. An old woman totters down the bank and opens a knot in the corner of her garment. A few pieces of bone, an old decayed tooth is deposited in the bed of the river ; it was all that remained after the body of her lord had been

burned. The Brahmins are around her and ease her, if not of her sorrow, of her money certainly. She has none to defend her.

There lies a poor wretch in praying attitude before a cow, to whom he has offered some yellow flowers. Behind her are the Brahmins preparing some nasty pills of the five products of the cow, which the man is to swallow in order to be restored to his caste, from which he had been suspended for touching unwittingly some forbidden food, or drinking from the water-pot of a low-caste man. Another in a similar prostrate position is receiving absolution for a horrible crime committed. His cow had been sick, and he was advised to get her bled. He had called in a Mussulman veterinarian to perform the operation. After this the cow seemed to get better, rose up and ate ; but two days afterward she dropped down and died. The village Brahmin pronounced the owner guilty of cow-slaughter, and sentenced him to go on pilgrimage to the Ganges with two hundred rupees to pay the Brahmins that hold the keys of heaven and hell, commencing of course with the village Brahmin. He had not the money, but could borrow it at 24 per cent. interest, and in doing this had to mortgage his house and fields to the money dealer.

There are Brahmins that ought to have been here at the *mela*, but have failed to make their appearance. They had been commissioned by some relations of a deceased person to take the few remaining pieces of bone to the Ganges. They started with all due ceremony, but buried the bones in the next grave, and are sitting at ease in a neighboring village waiting for their proper time to return. The people themselves will show you with a smile the little mole-hills where the bones are buried, and tell you their origin.

The throng has grown thicker and thicker, the noise greater, the dust more suffocating, the heat more intense, the minds of the pilgrims more besotted, their pockets more empty, and those of the Brahmins more heavy. But these go home with a light heart and a cheerful countenance. They can afford to pass by the tent of the missionaries with a contemptuous sneer, ignoring the efforts of these faithful preachers of righteousness, seeing that the whole world had been here to pay homage to the Ganges. The number of hearers at the mission tent has been thinned very rapidly; only a few linger with the missionary, undecided what to do. The one in taking leave says, "I shall pay you a visit at your station;" another, "I will take leave of my relations first, and then come to you to become a Christian;" a third, "I am going to fetch my wife and children. I shall come and be baptized." Alas! how seldom are these promises fulfilled; how soon are good impressions lost, and how many bright hopes of the missionary are never realized.

The few articles are now gathered up by the pilgrims; they are tied in a bundle and thrown over the shoulder; but each one carries in his hand a large bottle of Ganges water. It is stored away carefully at home, for 't is good in cases of sickness, it is required in the worship of idols, it is needed for the dead and the dying.

The missionaries take down their tent; their heavy boxes have become

the cart is loaded and away they go, wondering what the result of all this or, fatigue, and exposure will be, and whether the seed scattered will spring some day and bear fruit. The walls of Jericho still stand firm and erect; many a blast of the trumpet will be needed to bring them down. The shout, "Gangá jí kí jai," still fills the air wherever the returning pilgrims appear; but a soft voice in the heart of the Christian preacher answers, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing. Blessing and honor and glory and power be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb forever and ever."

Within a few hours all signs of human life have disappeared from the vast plain—booths and merchandise, pilgrims, fakirs, and Brahmins, all have disappeared. The missionaries, too, have left. Once more the banks of the Ganges are as silent as they were before the *mela*. Swarms of crows and vultures are still hovering over the place, and dogs crawl about in search of food. One day more and these also will be gone.